

For the Housewife? From ‘The Singing Cook’ to ‘Common-Sense Cookery’: The First (Disrupted) Twenty Years of Television Cooking Programmes in Britain (1936-1955)

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Television cooking programmes are ubiquitous on the established institutions’ television channels, dedicated food channels and online. They have become a popular focus for research in recent years, this research often exploring their impact on audiences, societies and cultures. Much of this research examines programmes produced and broadcast during and following the 1990s. These programmes are often readily available to view as they have been stored and archived by the broadcasting institutions themselves, or recorded at home by audiences and subsequently shared on platforms such as YouTube.

In Britain, public broadcasting of television began in November 1936, to a limited audience within the reach of the single Alexandra Palace transmitter in London, and who could afford the expensive new equipment required to receive moving images and sound in the home. At this time, routine archiving of broadcasts was not the norm, with relatively small numbers of example programmes surviving intact for viewing purposes today. The majority of programmes were broadcast live, and many of those recorded for broadcast were subsequently wiped for a variety of reasons, including cost and storage restraints.

The initial fifty years of television broadcasts in Britain began to be documented as milestones and anniversaries arose – most notably by historian Asa Briggs. Briggs had previously published a social history of men representative of the Victorian period (Briggs, 1954) before being commissioned in 1957 to write a history of the BBC by the then Director-General, Sir Ian Jacob (Taylor, 2020). Briggs developed the commission into a wider history of broadcasting in Britain, published over five volumes between 1961 and 1995 (Briggs, 1961; 1965; 1970; 1979; 1995). Briggs’ contributions to broadcast history in Britain began the study of media history (Taylor, 2020).

Television cooking programmes are an established part of ‘modern’ or at least ‘recent’ lifestyle and broadcast schedules, and consequently the focus of different aspects of academic research. Strange (1998) outlined the key elements of television cooking programmes as a genre, focusing on those broadcast in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s. Oren (2013) analysed similar American examples. Bell and Hollows (2005), DeSolier (2005), Bonner (2015) and Matwick and Matwick (2015) have analysed the seemingly ordinary nature of these programmes, revealing how they can influence popular media consumption and taste. Hollows (2003) examined their connection to celebrity by looking at the example of Nigella Lawson. Collins (2009) provides an introduction to the evolution of television cooking programmes, focused primarily on American

broadcasts. DeBacker and Hudders (2015) examine their impact on eating habits. Most now assume that the format, style and presentation of food, and cooking, on television follows established ideas, audiences and commercial ties. But, was this always the case? How were these early programmes created, viewed and consumed? In what ways did they mirror society, culture and taste? To what degree are they bound up with innovatory pro-modern ideas and concepts that have become normative?

This paper considers the impact that World War II had on the development of these programmes in Britain, by looking at the types and styles of programmes broadcast pre-war (1936-1939) and post-war (1946-1955). Television broadcasting in Britain was disrupted during the war, with the entire television service closing suddenly in 1939, re-emerging to a much wider audience, with altered broadcasting principles seven years later.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was established in 1922 as the British Broadcasting Company, with a strong set of public service principles – namely to inform, to educate and to entertain (Briggs, 1985). The advent of television in Britain in 1936 is often mistakenly described as a ‘technological advance’ in society, particularly by those who take a technological determinism framework, where technology is seen as having important effects on life, society and culture, for their analysis. Raymond Williams, in his writings about culture and mass media, which writings led to the development of significant theories in cultural studies, argued that television instead became available as an element in a process of change that was in fact occurring anyway (Williams, 1975).

This change of emphasis on the causes and effects of technology, society and culture led Brian Winston in turn to develop a model of the ‘social sphere’ illustrating the significant changes required to bring a technology to life, from ideation to prototype, with the required social conditions and impetus necessary to bring the invention to prominence. Winston’s model additionally showed how ideas were suppressed and diffused by rivals and competitors (Winston, 1998a) and he outlined the long timeline of events, technology and scientific progressions which culminated in the ‘arrival’ of television in Britain in 1936. The ideation of moving images which would form the collective idea of ‘television’ stretched back centuries, and indeed Winston notes, by the First World War, the dream of television was itself over thirty years old (p.91).

Winston refuted the argument that technological advance was merely a result of a scientific process, instead he was able to demonstrate the ways in which social forces

controlled media technology and as a result, shaped the agenda of the 'development of television' at every stage (Winston, 1998b). Winston concluded that social forces were able to both push and hinder developments (1998b, p.342) prompting a 'social fit' for the technology of television.

The first television broadcasts reached only a few hundred homes in London. Few had either the necessary money or desire to purchase a television set. At that time, sets cost around twenty-six guineas, in today's terms, four thousand pounds; equivalent to eight months wages for an average Londoner that year, or the price of a small car (Hilmes, 2003). Few households could afford the new technology. In addition, early adopters were naturally low in numbers with some people feeling suspicious of television generally, and of its long-term sustainability (Briggs, 1970). Commentators at the time wondered if it could really take over from the beloved wireless sets which sat in homes up and down the land. Television was seen as a disruption to the routines of home life and social existence (Ellis 2002).

Winston (1998b, p.113) notes that by the time public television broadcasts began in Britain in 1936, the medium of radio broadcasting was itself not an 'old medium', suggesting that the BBC may have suppressed the development and promotion of television broadcasting to support the growing mass audience for radio. Radio had become 'mass media' relatively earlier in the 1920s (p86). Scannell (1996) asserts that before World War II, the working classes, both as an audience and as a subject, had been marginalised by national radio, only being acknowledged on the regional service. It was only during the war that the working classes became a focus for the BBC and their broadcasts, for reasons of morale and propaganda.

Advice about cooking, food and the transmission of recipes, knowledge and skill was established by the BBC via radio broadcasts by the 1930s (Lyon and Ross, 2016). Programmes about food and cookery were aimed at 'housewives', transmitted at times suitable for them to tune in to and covered a range of topics intended primarily to educate. Such programmes appeared popular and were often bundled into the *Women's Hour* slot (BBC Genome, 2020).

Most cooking talks were broadcast live on the radio (Lyon and Ross, 2016). Presenters such as Xavier Marcel Boulestin and Mrs Arthur Webb (BBC Genome, 2020) sought to convey cookery demonstrations to listeners, who patently could not see the demonstration happening. Boulestin was French and owned restaurants in London. He encouraged listeners to take a more continental approach in their cooking. Webb was more traditional in her approach, focusing on British fare. Both Boulestin and Webb released cookbooks throughout their broadcasting career. Boulestin publishing *What Shall We Have Today?* in 1931 (Boulestin, 1931) and Webb *Economical Cookery* in 1933 (Webb, 1933).

Prior to the establishment of radio talks and advice, transmission of knowledge about cooking was through print or orally transmitted from generation to generation (Humble, 2005). Cookbooks and manuals of household

management were often gifted as wedding presents or passed from mother to daughter. With the advent of cooking talks on radio, new ideas, new techniques and new knowledge could be shared, created and discussed. Recipes could be noted down and attempted in the home. Samples of recipes were published in the BBC's own broadcast magazines, *Radio Times* and *The Listener*. The programmes themselves reflected the social situation in Britain at the time, where the majority of household tasks were in the domain of women (Bell and Hollows, 2006). Some cooking talks did branch out to appeal to men; these were not frequent and were seen as experimental or perhaps entertaining to a select audience (for example *Radio Times*, 1936a and 1950).

It is unlikely, however, that the very first viewers of television cooking programmes had any prior experience of cooking. Television attracted new audiences in terms of entertainment, but also with respect to information and education, the keystones of the BBC mission. The same applied to knowledge of food, cooking and homemaking. The audiences in the first few years of television were not likely to have been the same audiences who tuned into radio talks on food, or indeed had any interest in or experience of the preparation of food, as they were affluent and in the main employed domestic servants.

The earliest television cooking programmes, broadcast in the final few months of 1936, borrowed from radio and theatre, with a hint of the established linkages between food and celebrity (Kay, 2017). The first, entitled *London Characters*, was broadcast on 18th November 1936 featuring Rosina Dixon, as part of a magazine programme, with other prominent, and interesting people from the capital (*Radio Times* 1936b).

Rosina Dixon was portrayed as a fantasy representation of an employed household cook, designed to entertain and reassure audiences. In the *Radio Times*, she was listed as 'The Singing Cook', with an introduction given as 'A woman who can cook well in these days of tin-openers and restaurants is all too rare. And a woman who can cook well and sing well, like Rosina Dixon, is a positive treasure.' (*Radio Times*, 1936b). Dixon sang as she rolled out pastry, sending a message to employers fortunate enough to be able to tune in that cooks working in kitchens 'below' were happy, contented at work and talented. *London Characters* was broadcast live and therefore not recorded. However, she re-created her performance for film two weeks later, a copy of which still exists today (British Pathé, 1937).

Dixon portrays a domestic servant-cook, skilled at her role, and extremely happy. So happy indeed that she liked to sing as she worked. The audience conceivably watching upstairs while their own cook prepared meals downstairs, would consider their own staff, particularly as the country faced a looming servant crisis (Todd, 2009), with many leaving service for other employment (Benson, 2005). It may have been that Dixon was selected for broadcast to additionally encourage people to enter the profession,

although it is unlikely that potential domestic servants would have had the ability to watch the broadcast first-hand.

Two weeks after Dixon appeared as a one-time guest on *London Characters*, the *Radio Times* listed the first standalone cookery demonstration (BBC Genome, 2020). *Quarter of an Hour Meals* promised that Moira Meighn would 'give an example of what can be done with simple equipment in the preparation of good food.' (Radio Times, 1936c). The Alexandra Palace Television Archive lists the show simply as *Cookery* but with added details; 'Moira Meighn will give a talk and demonstration on the subject of good food that can be prepared with simple equipment and cooked on a single heating ring' (APTS, 2020).

For this programme, Meighn portrayed an imagined representation of society, unlikely to either represent reality or the immediate future of food preparation in London households, in a period of societal change. The BBC Archive (2020) includes a still photograph of Meighn being filmed for her appearance. Meighn is shown standing at a covered table as she grates a piece of cheese in front of a curtained window, which gives a glimpse of an outside streetlamp in shadow. Her table is furnished with simple equipment and supplies and she is dressed in heavy overalls with a large shawl tied around her shoulders.

The BBC continued to present different formats for television cooking programmes between 1936 and 1939. Radio favourite Mrs Arthur Webb made her first television appearance on the 30th August 1938, demonstrating the technique required for successful sulphured plums and potted damsons (BBC Genome, 2020). This would remain her only television appearance, although she did return to radio. Webb had a reputation at the BBC for having 'to be stopped with a hammer' when she began to speak without a script (Clarke, 1999). The BBC saw her as an ideal 'expert' to give 'ordinary experiences' which blurred the distinction between broadcaster and listener (Andrews, 2012), in contrast to the other demonstration of food and cooking in the early years of television prepared by 'staff' or those in higher levels of society.

It was Boulestin who was most successful in using the format of television cooking programmes to invent a 'spectacle' for viewers. Boulestin, recognised by the BBC as a 'great authority on cookery' and also a 'great conversationalist' (Sitwell, 2012), brought his skills to television with an initial series of five programmes broadcast in 1937 dealing with, and so titled, *Cooks Night Out* (Radio Times, 1937). Each fifteen-minute programme dealt with an individual dish, which together would make a suitable five-course menu to serve on the cook's night off. The series began with the preparation of an omelette at twenty-five minutes past nine o'clock on the evening of January 21st, well after mealtimes, indicating that the programme was intended to be primarily focused on entertaining the viewer.

Boulestin was shown on screen in a smartly tailored suit, with shirt, tie and matching pocket-handkerchief, with his hair slicked back. He did not dress as a 'cook', as Dixon and

Meighn had, instead he matched his *persona* as a restaurateur, perhaps to connect with the privileged audience of the time who would have encountered such a trusted and recognisable role while dining out. While maintaining the role of trusted mediator and providing a social link for the audience who may have had experience of eating out regularly in London, he did stand in front of a table laid out with equipment and supplies to demonstrate his dishes, with a typical kitchen set-up in the background (BBC Archive, 2020). In doing this he effectively was able to bridge the gap in knowledge and experience that an unaccustomed household would have had to the direct preparation of food, in a manner that allowed them to learn, enjoy and copy.

Boulestin dominated the first few years of television cooking programmes in Britain, although there were a regular number of other faces and formats shown. Some were not listed in the *Radio Times* but appear in the Alexandra Palace Television Archive records (APTS, 2020). Viewers were shown demonstrations of carving by B. J. Hulbert, filmed dressed in chefs' whites, complete with chef's hat as he carved a turkey raised on a silver-domed presentation stand, transferring slices of meat to patterned plates on a linen covered worktable (BBC Genome Blog, 2020). Further demonstrations featured M. Dutrey and M. Clafour displaying their culinary artistry (APTS, 2020).

During the 1930s the BBC were world leaders in terms of broadcasting, embracing the 'experimental'. Cookery programmes appear to have been part of this wider experiment, showcasing a range of types and styles, which both covered the aims to 'educate, inform and entertain' and spoke to different audiences. While television services were disrupted during wartime in Britain, from 1939 considerable debate occurred within the BBC about the 'claim on resources' that television could have (Briggs, 1995). When television services in Britain resumed in 1946, Britain had already lost seven years of development of regular, mass-audience television broadcasts.

Philip Harben began his broadcasting career on 26th September 1943 with a radio talk for the BBC about his experience as a catering adviser during wartime (BBC Genome, 2020). This led to a regular series of talks for the *Kitchen Front* programme (Lyon and Ross, 2016), and other programmes, before a series entitled *Cookery* for BBC television in June 1946 (BBC Genome, 2020). Each week, he guided viewers through a different dish, beginning with Lobster Vol-Au-Vents, homemade noodles and coffee before progressing to the use of dried eggs, 'emergency' bread and how to bottle fruits for the larder (for example; Radio Times, 1946). Harben attempted a connection back to Boulestin, referencing him during cookery demonstrations, this extending to recreating his advice by cooking along to a recording of Boulestin's *How To Make an Omelette*, which had been originally released as a 78rpm record (Radio Times, 1946).

Prior to World War II Joan Robins had been working as a home advisor with the Gas Light and Coke Company (later the Gas Board), before moving to the Ministry of Food to work as an advisor (ODNB, 2020b). In 1947, Robins was invited to launch a new cookery programme on BBC, *Housewife in the Kitchen* (BBC Genome, 2020), broadcast in the afternoons. Robins remained known as the 'afternoon cook' (ODNB, 2020b) while Harben continued to mainly present cookery programmes in the evenings, presenting similarly themed 'stretching the ration' programmes on the BBC (BBC Genome, 2020). In September 1948, Robins joined Harben on his series, *For the Housewife*, to demonstrate the use of new chemical substances to save on soap, leading to sporadic joint appearances before Robins joined Harben as a regular assistant presenter on his *Cookery Lesson* series in 1950 (Radio Times, 1950). Robins appeared on screen as a 'housewife' with her hair tied up tightly, wearing a short-sleeved, clean, white blouse and an apron covering her skirt (Radio Times, 1949a).

In 1951, Robins presented a controversial science-based series on slimming, which included claims which were subsequently refuted by the British Medical Association, resulting in fifty thousand disappointed women writing to complain to the BBC when the information pamphlets they sent for were withdrawn. These 'plump' women were supposedly desperate to benefit from the 'BBC diet' which they had seen on screen (Daily Mirror, 1951). Robins subsequently wrote a series of books linked to her 'common-sense' broadcasts on cooking (Robins, 1954), preserving (Robins, 1957) and slimming (Robins, 1952) before returning to industry, eventually becoming the president of the National Council of Women (ODNB, 2020b).

The post-war years continued to witness the promotion of the 'housewife' on screen, largely for a new mass audience of households around the country who were beginning to install television sets in their homes. Marguerite Patten initially described herself as a housewife and a home economist (Bateman, 1966), only later in her career listing her occupation as a cookery writer and broadcaster (ODNB, 2020c). Her first broadcasts were on the BBC radio programme *Women's Hour*, giving regular cookery talks about cakes (BBC Genome, 2020). Her first television appearance was in November 1947 on the afternoon magazine programme, *Designed for Women*, as the expert on cookery, demonstrating the preparation of meals for those 'in a hurry', those wishing to stretch their rations and introducing 'foreign dishes' such as Apple Strudel, Ravioli and Moussaka. Appearances continued on *Designed for Women* until 1950, when Patten joined Harben as an assistant presenter on his *Cookery Lesson* series as well as fronting her own series, *Cookery*, in 1951 (BBC Genome, 2020).

On screen, Patten performed the role of a typical housewife (Moseley, 2009) wearing fashionable, flower-patterned dresses with her hair short, curled and framing

her face, in a performance of domesticity, intimacy and friendship with viewers (Andrews, 2012). However, her appearance could also be seen as aspirational and based on fantasy, with audiences seeing a representation in her performances of what they strove to attain rather than a representation of who they actually were.

Cooking, and discussion about cooking, began to play a more prominent role in the scheduled programmes aimed at women, such as *For the Housewife* (BBC Genome, 2020). Alongside straightforward cooking demonstrations by Patten and others, segments were devoted to theatrical sketches featuring established stars of stage and screen, such as Yvonne Arnaud (BBC Genome, 2020).

This pattern of television cooking programmes based on the foundations of home economics and following the advice of Government departments, continued until 1955. Fanny Cradock, a new face to television, transferred from giving radio talks on food (Radio Times, 1952) to an altogether new, and unusual, portrayal of food and cooking on television, firmly connecting education, information and entertainment, that would be further developed over the next two decades (Geddes, 2017).

The first twenty years of television saw incredible periods of invention, innovation and creation matched with the disruption of war, and disruption of television broadcasting itself. Food advice and the transmission of cooking skills were undergoing a period of change and adaptation. Although the early prototypes set a pattern for television cooking programmes for decades to come in terms of the style, format and content, the first broadcasts before the war were experimental, featuring a range of styles designed to appeal to audiences looking for knowledge and entertainment in a period of disruption coinciding with and marked by the declining presence of household servant cooks. Pre-war cooking programmes flipped between pure entertainment with Dixon, celebrity-driven broadcasts with Boulestin focused on spectacle and early attempts to formulate fantasy representations of an imagined new British society.

The radical potential of television, and television cooking programmes, was suppressed both by war and by the institution responsible for the country's broadcasts, the BBC itself, fearful of disruption to what had become the established norm in radio broadcasts. When television resumed after the war, the focus shifted to propagandising broadcasts endorsed by the Ministry of Food and intended to promote the establishment of the 'housewife' as the main figure responsible for food, cooking and homemaking. The connections established between celebrity and cooking would remain, although at a somewhat suppressed scale. Harben referenced Boulestin in his television cooking programmes. Patten established herself as a celebrity demonstrator travelling the country to give live cooking performances, mainly to 'other' normal housewives. Cradock took over the mantle, successfully linking both, taking the diffused development of television

cooking programmes to a new level of popularity, for a further period of twenty years (Geddes, 2019), leading to an explosion of programmes, formats and styles.

This paper has shown that disruptive social events had an impact not only on food and cooking, but also on the way that both were produced and represented by the BBC as the sole media institution broadcasting pre- and post-war. Broadly, before World War II, the BBC experimented with well-known 'celebrity' cooks and personalities, famous for their connections to food, cookbooks and for previous broadcasts on radio. They helped to shape a new format of television cooking programmes, offering a glimpse of spectacle and entertainment linked to food preparation. After the War, cooking broadcasts on television reverted to a more traditional 'advice' format familiar to radio listeners, and following Ministry of Food approved guidance, encouraging viewers to make the most of limited foods and equally limited broadcasts from before the War would be revisited, linking entertainment, education and information.

These changes were shaped by those involved as presenters, demonstrators and 'celebrities' on screen, and also by how they were viewed and understood by audiences. The disruption to television services itself brought about a disruption to style and format. Perhaps the ongoing shift from established television channels and programming to social media, on-demand and ever-emerging formats will bring more significant disruption to the currently established genre of television cooking programmes, leading to a radical overhaul of ideas yet with ultimately the same key principles of entertainment, education and information. What we shall eat tomorrow has always been influenced by what we ate yesterday.

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